March 13, 2007

Crossing the Divide

A Time When Partisanship Didn't Mean Enmity

by Cokie Roberts

Chip Somodevilla

The Capitol hasn't always been split by polar opposites. Getty Images

"My father always preached that in battles over votes, there were no permanent friends, no permanent enemies."

Morning Edition, January 26, 2007 · Growing up in Washington in the 1950s, one of my best friends was Libby Miller. Her father, Bill Miller, was a Republican congressman from New York; my father, Hale Boggs, was a Democratic congressman from New Orleans. They each fought their way up the party ladders — my father became Majority Leader of the House, and Libby's father ran as Barry Goldwater's vice president.

These were men who played hardball politics, who could take on foes ferociously — these men were partisans. Shoot, we little girls were partisans — and, as teenagers, fierce partisans — but we were also fond friends. We still are.

Washington was a much less frenzied place in those years. When the day's votes ended, congressmen, and they were almost all men, didn't rush off to some fundraiser hosted by a lobbyist. Instead, they gathered in someone's office and broke out the bourbon and branch. Most members moved here for the session and moved "home," as it was always called, for the recess. The ones who "batched it" in the capital expected their colleagues' wives, regardless of party, to provide dinner on a regular basis.

The wives knew each other well. They saw each other at the club for congressional spouses — I went to dancing school there with the Nixon girls. The wives joined PTAs and ran charitable organizations together. We congressional kids met at events our parents dragged us to, and at ones we begged to go to. We roamed the Capitol building, exploring its secrets and enjoying its storytellers. None of that is true today.

What changed it? So many things, like the race for money, the weekend rush back to the home district. In the time-honored tradition of running against the institution where they want to serve, congressional candidates assail Washington as an inside-the-Beltway island at best; as a sinful Sodom on the Potomac at worst. So, many families never move here — never run into each other at church, never chaperone dancing school at the Congressional Club.

The parties have become more ideologically homogeneous, as Southern Democrats either switched parties or lost to Republicans, and Northern and Midwestern Republicans suffered similar fates at the hands of Democrats.

Add to that the carefully computerized drawing of congressional districts to create safe seats, and you end up with members who never have to talk to someone who doesn't agree with them, much less listen. And then there's the media. Microphones go to the loudest, most outrageous voice. The boring guy in the middle hardly merits airtime or print inches. And the shrillness of blogs makes anyone who isn't a flamethrower look like a wimp.

Changing this poisonously personal partisanship is a tall order. I've come to believe that the time that I grew up in,

that lingered on during the years I was first covering Washington, was aberrant. Throughout most of American history, harsh partisanship has been the norm. But Bill Miller and Hale Boggs shared something with each other and with the country that transcended party. Most of the men who went to Congress in the 1940s and '50s were veterans of World War II. They knew what a real enemy was — it was a dictator across the ocean, not a guy across the aisle.

For a brief moment after Sept. 11, 2001, it looked like a real enemy might bind the parties together again. But not for long. So, now it's up to the voters. Voters can convince politicians that it's in their interest to cooperate in order to get things done. And then it's just a matter of doing it. My father always preached that in battles over votes, there were no permanent friends, no permanent enemies.

After my father was lost in a plane crash while on a partisan mission — campaigning for a fellow Democrat — my mother, Lindy Boggs, was elected to his seat. She served as a senior woman in Congress when Nancy Pelosi, another congressional kid we knew, was elected to the House.

Speaker Pelosi remembers that after one of her early floor speeches, my mother pulled her aside and whispered, "Don't fight every fight as if it were your last." It's good advice for the speaker, the president and the rest of Washington. It's one way to cross the divide.

Related NPR Stories

Jan. 22, 2007
Poll Shows Public Wants Compromise... Up to a Point

Jan. 22, 2007
Political Compromise Prized, But Is It Attainable?